

Touch (you told me to fit right in) by lucdarling

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Summary:

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"Don't you need to ask your parents first?" Lucas did, when he invited Max to dinner two weeks ago.

"Nah," Max dismisses his worry easily, even as her face screws up the tiniest bit when he says the word parent like it always does. "He'll be fine with it."

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Author's Note:

- For [hotdadlicense](#).

Title from "Touch" by July Talk. I wrote this in one sitting and it was wonderful. Hope you enjoy it too.

"You wanna eat dinner at mine tonight?" Max asks, just before she stumbles through a kickflip on the uneven blacktop during recess.

Lucas still thinks she's great and wants to hold her hand between classes. He hasn't asked, not yet, but the words are heavy on his tongue when Max smirks at him.

"Don't you need to ask your parents first?" He did, when he invited Max to dinner two weeks ago. He'd suffered through Erica's teasing and his mom cleaning the house from ceiling to baseboards the weekend before his new best friend and maybe crush came over.

"Nah," Max dismisses his worry easily, even as her face screws up the tiniest bit when he says the word parent like it always does. "He'll be fine with it. Hope you're not expecting anything fancy, it's just going to be spaghetti with red sauce."

"I like spaghetti," Lucas says and Max grants him a tiny hint of a smile before kicking off and skating across the blacktop. He grins at her back and goes to the pay phone to leave a message at home. His mom will probably be a little mad that he's missing dinner but she'll understand.

After Max had left on her skateboard after dessert at the Sinclairs, swearing up and down it was fine and she had someone waiting at home - his parents had said Lucas was a good friend to Max. That they needed to be kind to her, and Lucas was a good son for making friends so quickly with the new girl at Hawkins Middle.

Lucas had put it out of his mind, scoffing at the patronization and jamming a pillow over his head when they kept talking at him about

poor Max.

Max isn't poor, she wears boys clothes because they're comfortable and clothes for girls have too many frills and come only in pink. She doesn't listen to the other girls in their class who laugh at her and wait for her to shrivel like the other outcasts, she laughs right back with her middle finger up. She skates everywhere because school starts later than the workday for adults, something Lucas' own mom has been campaigning against. Plenty of kids are at school before the bell rings, hanging out and doing last-minute homework. There's nothing unusual in those things.

It's when he's keeping pace with Max on his bike that Lucas realizes his parents were talking literally: poor Max. The houses on Cherry Street - the other side of Hawkins where Lucas and Mike live - are a little more run down, smaller homes than those in his cul-de-sac.

Lucas shrugs to himself and parks his bike on the curb as Max dismounts. Her shoulders are near her ears and Lucas smiles at her. He really wants to take her hand, like his dad does with his mom when she's stressing about dinner being burned or her cases at the public defender's office, but that's too quick too soon for a girl he's known all of three months.

"This is where you live? Cool." Lucas says, instead and Max almost visibly relaxes.

"Yeah, like you didn't already know."

"Small town," Lucas shrugs and follows her across the yard. "Not much you can do about that. Did you live in a big city back in California?"

"No," Max calls over her shoulder as she opens the front door. She keeps her shoes on but Lucas toes his pair off. "It was a suburb. I guess like this, but only forty minutes into San Diego. You guys just have forest and two and a half hours to Indianapolis."

"Guilty," Lucas grins as he looks around. The house is only one story with paint peeling in a corner of the ceiling. There's a pile of moving boxes at one end of the couch, unopened mail stacked up like the

cardboard makes an end table.

“Homework?” Max questions. “Billy will be home in like, two hours and he’ll make us dinner.”

“I guess it’s better than leaving it to the night before.” Lucas concedes. He follows her into a kitchen with yellowed linoleum, an ashtray on the counter not even half full of butts. He takes a seat at the kitchen table, scarred wood with mismatched chairs.

There’s no placemats, no report cards or photographs on the fridge like Lucas is used to seeing at his own house. He unzips his jacket but keeps it on as Max plunks down a can of soda in front of him. He isn’t sure if there’s heating and doesn’t want to ask.

“Geography or English first?” is what comes out of his mouth instead, spoken more to his backpack against the chair than Max herself.

“Geography, Billy can help with English if I need it.”

“I think it’s cool you call your dad by his first name. He must be a hippie of the 60s, right?” Lucas takes a stab in the dark because everything Max has said about her parents is Billy this, Billy that or just staying quiet when the rest of the Party talks about their mom’s wine nights or dad falling asleep in front of the tv again.

Max chokes on her mouthful of soda. She spends the next minutes, the longest of Lucas’s life, coughing until her cheeks are bright red.

“Geez Lucas, quit with the questions! Billy’s definitely not a hippie but oh man.” Her noises die away as she catches her breath. “I’m gonna tell him that.”

He shifts in his chair, scribbling down an answer about the latitude and longitude of Guam. “Sorry. I didn’t mean to pry, or make you choke.”

“It was pretty funny, “ Max gives a little laugh, a giggle on anyone else more feminine. “He’ll probably get a kick out of it.”

They do their homework in silence after that, crumpling their empty soda cans and tossing them towards the trash can by the back door.

Neither can makes it in but they laugh anyhow.

“You get started on dinner yet, twerp?” A deep voice makes Lucas spin around in his chair.

A man stands in the doorway, blond curls to his shoulders. He’s got a tool belt on, the kind Lucas has seen on construction crews when the mayor’s plans to widen Main Street finally happened last summer. He looks tired in the same way Lucas’s dad is on a Friday night after a rough shift, but it’s only Tuesday.

“Thought I wasn’t allowed to use the stove without supervision.” Max rolls her eyes as the man sighs. She does introductions with a wave of her hand. “This is Billy, Lucas. Lucas, Billy.”

“Yeah on second thought, it’s okay you did your homework. No need for another scorch mark on the ceiling. Stay in school, make good grades.” The last words are flippant but Lucas can tell Billy means them.

Max, usually free with her sarcasm just like Erica, only nods her head and bends back down to her workbook. Lucas follows suit as Max’s not-dad clatters around the kitchen. He looks too young but Lucas can recognize some of his swagger in the way Max walks down the hallway.

He steals a peek at the cupboard as Billy searches for the box of pasta. Lucas notices they’re going to be eating dollar store brand, the kind Dustin’s mom makes when her deadbeat ex’s child support is late.

Max is watching him suspiciously, seated on his left at the kitchen table. “Maybe you want to look at the medicine cabinet while you’re here too, stalker.” The words are rude but her tone isn’t too mean.

“Just getting to know you,” Lucas excuses his curiosity with a smile and fills in another answer for geometry. Max’s frown deepens but it makes Billy chuckle as he turns the stove burner on with a minimum of cussing.

“Smooth, kid.”

"Why, thank you." Lucas turns his grin on him, but it falters when all the man does is stare blank-faced and unimpressed.

Max snickers.

"So you thought a house guest would be a nice surprise, huh?" He turns his bored expression on Max next. She shrugs, unimpressed. Lucas remembers that his dad called her a handful when his parents thought he wasn't listening and thinks she probably sees Billy's face set in stone like that often. Of course, Lucas knows they've said the same thing about their daughter.

"You said I should make friends, that we aren't moving."

"We aren't," Billy growls. "Doesn't mean you should just bring 'em home with no warning."

"You aren't your dad, no one cares." Max counters, an argument Lucas watches play out in half sentences and facial expressions. It ends when Billy turns back to the boiling water, upending the box of pasta with jerky movements.

"I'm gonna shower and get changed, stir that shit before it boils over." He orders and leaves the kitchen with a beer in his hand.

Lucas can hear the bathroom door shut in the small house and the water running on the other side of the kitchen wall. He doesn't move, even as Max jumps up to turn the stove's heat from the highest setting to something more manageable that doesn't lick the bottom of the pot with orange tongues.

"So," Max says, rocking back on her heels. "That's Billy."

"I got that," Lucas nods his head as he starts packing up his homework and school supplies. "Cool dude."

"He's an asshole," Max corrects. "And dumb, but he tries I guess." She stirs the pasta slowly. "Like thinking the pasta will cook faster on higher heat and still be edible."

"Cooking is just practice, my mom says." Lucas says without thinking and then winces. He stacks Max's binders and notebook together

neatly, biting his tongue before he looks up again.

Max is doing a pretty good impression of Billy from earlier, her own version of a blank face set on her freckled features. “Yeah, I guess that’s what moms say. Sappy shit like that.” She huffs, blowing a strand of red hair out of her face.

“You can borrow mine, if you want.” Lucas offers without thinking. He knows she wouldn’t mind, even as he’s sorting through in a corner of his brain just how much to share with his parents about Max’s home. He won’t be saying anything about the mattress on the floor he spied from the open bedroom door, or the nearly empty cupboards. That would invite pity and he knows both Max and Billy would snap and snarl at it.

“I’m just trying for another dinner invitation, dude.” Max brushes him off with a laugh. “Your mom’s cooking is loads better than Billy’s.”

“Any time,” Lucas says and he means it. “You and Billy, if he wants.”

“If I want what?” Speak of the blue-eyed devil and he shall appear with damp curls and a faded band t-shirt that Lucas has never heard of.

“Dinner you didn’t cook.” Lucas shrugs guilelessly at the suspicious look.

“Don’t need pity,” Billy says gruffly and hip-checks Max away from the stove. She stands on her tiptoes to get the pot lid down from on top of the fridge so Billy can strain the pasta over the sink in a cloud of steam. Max pulls the jar of sauce from the fridge as he does, a well-practiced dance in the tiny kitchen.

“I know.” Lucas wills his voice not to crack and miraculously it doesn’t. “My mom is happiest when she gets reactions to her food and we’ve eaten everything out of her cookbook like, three times already. She needs a new audience.”

Lucas stops talking when the other two trade a look he can’t decipher.

“Right,” Billy says as he dumps the red sauce straight from the jar onto the pasta, sounding firm. “We do all right, Luke. Don’t need anyone in our business.” He puts the pot back on the stove, stirring with a twist to his lips like he wants to say more.

“Billy.” Max cuts in before he can open his mouth again, like a warning.

“Food will be ready in a few, so set the table and get your drink.” Billy changes the subject. “You already had a soda so it’s water or milk for you, Maxine. Don’t think I didn’t spy the empty can in the trash.”

Max rolls her eyes and turns to Lucas. “You want water or milk?”

“Oh, is my name Maxine too?” Lucas teases. “Maybe I’ll have a soda instead.”

“Water or milk for anyone not of legal drinking age,” Billy announces and shuts the stove off with an audible click of the knob.

“Milk,” Lucas decides and Max pours them both glasses.

“Silverware’s in the drawer closest to you,” Max says off handed and it takes Lucas a few seconds to work out she’s talking to him.

Billy jokes, “Now you’re putting your guest to work? Not a very good hostess.”

“I’m not a housewife,” Max snaps with muted fire. Lucas gets to his feet before it continues further and finds three sets of forks and spoons. Some paper towels folded in half quickly become napkins as Billy plops three servings of pasta into bowls just large enough to hold the food.

They’re all quiet for the first few minutes.

“You need to be home by a certain time?” Billy asks, popping the tab on a second can of beer.

“I can bike home, it’s no problem.” Lucas says. “I go home from Mike and Will’s houses later than this all the time.” He stuffs his mouth

with a larger than normal bite in hopes he won't have to answer further. Something about the question is awkward, like Billy's going through the motions of a parent when he obviously isn't.

He's trying, Lucas remembers Max saying not a few hours earlier.

"I'll drive you home. Your bike will fit in the trunk." Billy answers easily. "We're out of ice cream anyhow."

"Yes!" Max fist pumps at the table and turns the charm on Billy the same way she argued her way into an extension for their English essay just last week. The negotiations this time are about milkshakes from the place that used to be Benny's or a diner in Churubusco.

"Locals just call it Busco," Lucas tells them. It's comfortable, sitting in Max's kitchen with his jacket on and listening to them argue in the same way that he and Erica do.

"Busco, then." Max says.

"It's a school night."

"We're not gonna be out that late. If we are, you can just write me a note."

"Education is important," Billy pins her with a stare. Max glares back, unphased until she turns to Lucas.

"You want to come for some ice cream?"

Billy puts his head in his hands. "This isn't a negotiation, shitbird. The way to fly under the radar is not to draw attention."

"Ice cream could be considered a food group, to hear Dustin tell it." Lucas eggs Max on, not exactly sure if he wants to go out for a frozen treat when the temperature tonight is supposed to drop to below freezing for the first time since the heat of summer passed.

"Don't help her argument, man," Billy points at him but there's something happy lurking in his blue eyes or the twist of his lips.

"Ice cream in Busco and I'll be in bed on Friday no later than ten. We

can skip movie rentals for two weeks.” Max bargains. Billy nods and sticks out his hand. They shake on it with serious faces, cracking up a heartbeat later for some reason only known to them. Lucas doesn’t ask for an explanation.

“So, you want to come for ice cream?” Billy offers the idea to Lucas and it sounds more genuine than Max, who had just been trying to get someone on her side. “You’ll be home by nine thirty at the latest.”

Busco is an hour away, Lucas is pretty sure. It’s nearly seven o’clock now.

“Sure, but I should call my mom first.”

“I paid the bill this month, you’re in luck. Phone’s in the living room,” Billy says and stands from the table. Max grabs at the empty bowls and silverware, carrying them to the sink. They stand there together as Max waits for the water to heat up and Billy scrapes the pasta stuck to the bottom of the pot into the trash. Neither of them look at him still sitting at the table.

Lucas gets the hint and goes to call his mom. Maybe he can leave another message.

He isn’t that lucky, not when Erica picks up on the second ring.

“Sinclair residence, who’s talking and who do you want to talk to?”

“It’s Lucas and I need to talk to mom.”

“Lucas who skipped out on dinner?” Erica yells, loud enough that Lucas has to pull away from his ear. “The one who thought a message was a great way to tell mom you weren’t home after school? You’re gonna get your butt whupped so good when you get home.”

“That’s enough, Erica.” Lucas cautiously brings the receiver back to his ear as his mom takes the phone from his little sister.

“Hi mom,” Lucas says, only a little nervous.

“Hi Lucas,” his mom says calmly, mch to his surprise. “You’re calling from Max’s house?”

“Yes ma’am.”

“When I said it was okay to go to your friend’s house for dinner, I guess it’s on me that I presumed her dad would call first.”

“Uh,” Lucas flounders. “It was last-minute, Mom. He was fine with it, I promise.” He adds hurriedly, “I’ll be home before ten.” No reason to tell her they’re apparently driving out of town for ice cream.

“Yes you will.” His mom is stern now. “Then we will be having a discussion after school tomorrow about being polite and planning ahead.”

“Yes ma’am.” Lucas shakes his head like she can tell through the phone. She probably can, it’s in the mom handbook alongside eyes in the back of their head and being good in the kitchen.

“I’ll see you later tonight then. Mind your manners.”

“I will,” Lucas promises right as Billy belches. “See you tonight.”

“Right, let’s get this show on the road!” Billy claps his hand together. Max is already carrying his backpack, handing it to him as she passes by to her bedroom for a thicker jacket.

Lucas fights the urge to plug his ears when Billy turns the Camaro on, blasting them all with music that’s more guitars and yelling than what his parents play on Sunday on the stereo system his dad’s been building since Lucas was a toddler.

Max grins at him from the other side of the backseat. They don’t talk much over the loud music, pulling faces at one another instead and punching the other when they spy a VW Beetle at the same time.

“Alright,” Billy says when he pulls into a parking spot and kills the engine. His voice is scratchy from the open window and the cigarette he smoked on the way. “Vanilla for gremlin one, what do you want?”

“Vanilla’s fine,” Lucas tells him. “I’ve got some money in my backpack, if you want.”

“I don’t need a kid’s lunch money.” Billy rolls his eyes. “I’ll get two

vanilla cones and you're not eating in the car so don't even ask. I think they have picnic tables around the back."

Max sticks her tongue out at Billy's back as he saunters over to the walk-up counter.

"So," Lucas turns to Max before she can put the driver's seat down and let them out of the backseat.

"Are you in witness protection? Did you see something bad in California and that's why you moved to Hawkins?" The questions tumble out of him in a rush.

Max's hands fumble at the lever behind the driver's seat at his words. The shadows in the car from the lights outside can't hide her incredulity.

"What? No!"

Lucas crosses his arms over his chest and lets them hang loose in the next breath, jittery that he's on the trail of something. There were enough clues at dinner and Max's house and he spent the car ride putting them together.

"Well Billy's clearly not your dad but he's trying. He's too young but you have the same expressions at some things. You don't talk about your life before Indiana like, at all." He drums his fingers on the seat next to him.

Max stops the action when she takes his hand in hers. Lucas shuts up.

"It's not witness protection but we are." She swallows and looks out the windshield rather than directly at Lucas. "Billy's dad married my mom when I was pretty young, not long after my real dad left. He wasn't nice."

Lucas lets out the breath he didn't realize he was holding, but Max doesn't elaborate further. He doesn't push for more details, just squeezes her hand gently.

"Thanks for telling me, Max."

“You were probably gonna figure it out anyway, stalker.” Max doesn’t let go of his hand even when they’re both out of the car and sitting at the picnic table.

It’s cold outside the sanctuary of the car’s backseat, with a breeze blowing across the flat prairie. It doesn’t matter, not when his nerves feel like they’re on fire.

He eats his ice cream contentedly as Billy and Max bicker about which is the better flavor between their own choices of mint chocolate chip and vanilla. They both loudly claim he’s lying when Lucas adds that his grandma eats nothing but butter pecan or rum raisin.

Billy drops Lucas at his house at nine thirty on the dot. Lucas thinks the grin on his face would be more at home in a pool hall or a dive bar, not that he’s actually been to either. He’s just heard about them from his uncle. The expression doesn’t fit behind the driver’s seat when the man’s just finished driving his step-sister and classmate out for ice cream.

“See you tomorrow,” Max says quietly as she helps pull Lucas’s bike from the trunk. Her hand brushes his and she yanks it away, red on her cheeks visible in the tail lights.

“Yeah,” Lucas grins. “See you.”

His mom only yells a little when he walks in the door, checks his homework and sends him to get ready for bed. Lucas falls asleep with a smile that makes his cheeks ache.